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AUTHOR Perrin, Robert
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ABSTRACT

An advanced writing class for English majors and minors in the teaching curriculum is designed to help encourage professional writing from public school teachers. The course involves extensive reading of professional journals, discussion of journals, and several writing assignments. Panel discussions on journals promote familiarity with differences in journal content and editorial policies and show students that classroom teachers, as well as well-known writers, can contribute articles. Writing assignments include a comment on an article, a short essay chosen from past topics in "English Journal," a book review, and a review of a journal. The final project, an essay written in response to a specific call for manuscripts, involves students in a writing project of their choice for a journal of their choice. (MM)

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Robert Perrin
Department of English
Indiana State University
Terre Haute, IN 47809

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"Preparing Professional Teacher-Writers"

In "A Teacher Talks Back," a 1980 EJ article, Virginia Silcox scorned college instructors who, as she put it, "have been infected with the publish-or-perish disease." She also criticized the editors of English Journal for perpetuating the "virus" among public-school teachers and at the same time suggested that "thousands of high-school English teachers neither write for EJ, nor do they read it." But perhaps most tragically, she suggested that many of these teachers have hidden the fact that "they are mute English teachers who think-write ingloriously."

If Silcox's vision is an accurate one, and I think in some ways it is, then we in writing and teacher education have a sizeable task ahead. But we always have had.

A brief survey of journals published primarily for middle- and high-school English teachers--will show that close to 50% of the articles have been written by teachers from the university. Whether that is because of the "virus," as Silcox notes, is not the central issue here, however. Rather, the issue is why many public-school teachers have been and remain inactive writers for the journals designed for them. Some are, undoubtedly, "inglorious" thinkers who are incapable of writing effectively. Others--a larger percentage I would guess--may simply feel that they are not being given the stimulus, either professional or financial, to justify the additional hours and energy that writing, revising, typing, mailing, and waiting require. And yet another group may feel the urge to contribute to journals but simply feel untrained to write the kinds of articles which journals publish--and may not wish to use their precious spare time and energy to learn the techniques.

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For the "inglorious" thinkers, we can do but little, except hope that they do not stifle their students. For those teachers who do not feel stimulated to write--for personal, professional, or financial reasons--we can offer no specific help. Essentially, however, it is the last group of teachers which we in English education can help--those who want to write but who do not feel fully trained to write professionally.

"Untrained?" many people may ask. "But these people were English majors and minors, the ones who did meticulous work, read the assignments carefully, commented in class, and wrote A papers." Yes, we've all taught those English majors and minors who were going to become public-school teachers. Yet, as James Quissenberry's 1981 English Education article suggests, most English majors are literature majors, for the good and bad that suggests. That has suitably prepared these prospective English teachers to evaluate and teach literature, but it has left them untrained in many facets of the teaching profession and has--more importantly for this discussion--left them untrained to write the kinds of essays which are published in the journals for secondary-school teachers. Consequently, it is time that we modify our curricula to include the kind of writing which public-school teachers might use. For if we want to encourage professional writing from middle- and high-school teachers, we should introduce future public-school teachers to professionally-focused writing while they are still at the university, so that writing professional articles (as well as reading them) is as much a part of their training as analyzing literature and writing literary essays for classes.

To these ends, I have planned an advanced writing course at Indiana State University which focuses on professional reading and writing of the kind prospective teachers might continue. The course in which I began these activities was a natural one for such an emphasis: English 307, a junior-senior advanced writing

course that is required for English majors and minors in the teaching curriculum. Because ISU offers a companion course, English 308, which concentrates on literary criticism, writing and research, I am free to explore the possibilities of professional reading and writing without feeling that I have ignored an important part of my students's literary training. At the same time--because my students are almost all in teacher training--this new focus seems all the more workable and worthwhile. The work for the course is divided into three roughly equivalent parts: readings, discussions of journals, and writing assignments.

For the readings, I have mined NCTE publications, as well as other journals which seem well matched to the professional work of public-school teachers. I have selected articles from Language Arts, English Journal, College English, and College Composition and Communication, trying to demonstrate for my students that educators are actively working at all levels to share experiences, insights, and information. In addition, I have gathered articles from English Education to provide an overview of English-teacher training, and I have also selected a few articles from Exercise Exchange, Illinois English Bulletin, and Indiana English, to familiarize my students with several other journals that might interest them. The general articles I have chosen suggest some of the concerns of the teaching profession at any grade level. Edward Corbett's "What Is Being Revived?," Evelyn Wright's "School English and Public Policy," and Ken Donelson's "Beacon Lights in the History of English Teaching" suggest the critical framework upon which so much of our work is based. To present theories of writing, I have included articles by Greg Larkin, Donald Murray, Gayle Price, Maxine Hairston, Linda Flower and Douglas Park, and others. These readings are intended to introduce my students to recent concerns of the profession . . . to establish a context for other work.

Another key activity for my English 307 students has been evaluating selected

journals. I have written to NCTE to get complimentary copies of Language Arts, English Journal, and College English. I have also written to smaller journals and arranged for my students to buy back issues so that we can discuss a single copy specifically. Every other week during the semester, a panel of three or four students presents an evaluation of a journal. The panel members are responsible for examining two-to-three years' worth of back issues and compiling basic information, while the members of the class are responsible for reading the sample copies which I distribute to them. The panel discussions are not the stuff of which great speech classes are made, but we are able to share a good deal of information in a short time. Some of the specific characteristics of each journal seem especially important in these discussions: average length of articles, subjects included, editorial stance, contributors, special sections, and editorial policies.

By examining the lengths and subjects of the articles, my students have begun to sense which journals prefer long, researched articles and which prefer shorter, experience-based essays. To people already familiar with these journals, my students's observations might seem elementary. But for them to discover that College Composition and Communication is essentially research-based and theoretical, or that English Journal often includes short, creative articles, is useful. They have begun to see which journals concentrate on the kinds of articles they will enjoy reading and using, as well as those not suited to their needs.

By noting and discussing the contributors to these journals, my students are able to see just how inclusive journal writing is. They see that contributors include well-known people like Corbett, Booth, and Murray, but also include instructors from high schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities all across the country.

The reviews of the journals take one entire class session every other week, but the discussions are specific and lively enough that I feel my students are being properly introduced to the journals I hope they will later subscribe to, read, and contribute to. And that has led me to construct my writing assignments to prepare them to do just that.

Using the essays I require my students to read for class, we establish our equivalent of College English's "Comment and Response." For one assignment, then, my students comment on articles which they have read. (They can use any articles which appear in the back issues we used, not necessarily limiting their choices to any one journal.) I do not rule out their writing support articles, but I suggest that they follow the unstated pattern used in College English: either add new information to the discussion or attack it.

I also use English Journal's "Our Readers Write About" format for two short assignments, since the three-hundred word limit imposed by the guidelines creates a new kind of writing problem. My students choose from a variety of topics from past issues of English Journal--providing them with the chance to write about topics which are serious as well as amusing. The students especially enjoy these assignments because they require them to hone their skills to present a valuable or entertaining observation in only three-hundred words.

My students also write a book review, although they have several formats to choose from. One format requires them to write a traditional three-hundred to seven-hundred word critical review of a relatively new work. Some choose textbooks, while others choose trade books of one kind or another. They model their work after that which they find in the journals and present their evidence as briskly and specifically as possible. The other format, again borrowed from English Journal, is the review format identified as "Too Good To Miss." This kind of review is more

expository and somewhat longer, allowing my students to evaluate books which they feel are important for either students or teachers of English.

In addition, each student is responsible for writing a review of one particular journal. The week that students are responsible to take part in a panel discussion, they are also responsible for submitting a three-hundred to five-hundred word evaluation, identifying the journal's major strengths and weaknesses. I encourage students to incorporate the materials they have prepared for the classroom discussion and consider adding any personal judgments about the usefulness of the journal to public-school teachers.

The final assignment for the course is an open one, but it has some fairly specific guidelines: 1) the essay must be written in response to a specific call for manuscripts--presented in a photocopy with the essay, 2) students must be able to feasibly meet the deadlines for submitting manuscripts, 3) they must also prepare a suitably brief cover letter, addressed to the journal's editor, and 4) students also include a photocopy of the editorial policy if the journal is not one which we have discussed in class. My students peruse their sample copies of journals, as well as other recent issues of the journals in my office or in the library to find suitable subjects about which to write. They search through journals we have discussed briefly in class but have not used. I then distribute the call for manuscripts issued by Indiana English for the following year, providing my students with an easily accessible set of topics if they find no others more suited to their tastes or experiences. When the essays are submitted, I evaluate them as I have evaluated the others. However, I add one additional kind of comment: advice on whether the essay might be worth revising, retyping, and submitting to the journal.

Lest--you--readers fear that the English 307 students from ISU will inundate

English journals across the country with second-rate articles, I do not suggest that many submit them. On the other hand, I see potential in many of my writers and several have had articles accepted. What strikes me most of all is that they feel comfortable with the journals they are "submitting" their essays to. They feel familiar with the editorial policies and the kinds of articles which are typically accepted. And though their writing has some problems which may still need to be overcome (who of us could not say the same?), my students are involved in writing projects of their choice for journals of their choice. That, I hope, will set a pattern for their future writing.

When I discuss this class plan with other people who are working with future teachers of English, I am always reminded of a question Ken Donelson raises in one of his editor's introductions to English Journal: "How can English teachers teach writing if they don't occasionally write for publication?" Most of us who feel that English teachers should write feel that way because we know that the difficult process of writing, revising, and sometimes revising again is the means by which some of our best thoughts are expressed. However, for professional writing to be successful--and practical for public school teachers to complete--we need to make sure that our prospective teachers have had experience with the kind of writing which secondary journals welcome. My advanced writing class at ISU is one plan to help encourage professional writing from public-school teachers. I hope there are others, because we in English education should encourage the kind of professional reading AND writing that future teachers can continue throughout their careers.

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